

The Wall Street Journal; November 3, 2004

## Stay the Course with North Korea

By JAMES R. LILLEY

Whoever has won the U.S. presidential contest should support continuing the multilateral approach to convince North Korea to give up its nuclear program. John Kerry, the Democratic candidate, has strongly backed holding direct talks with Pyongyang as the best way to get the communist state to disarm. But should he have won, he must quickly realize that President George W. Bush's preference of the "six-party talks" is the best approach.

The talks, hosted by China, provide the most effective means of resolving Pyongyang's nuclear threat and of putting it on the path of economic reform. China, the United States, South Korea, Russia and Japan -- the five parties facing North Korea -- have already agreed on four basic principles: 1) No weapons of mass destruction should be allowed on the Korean peninsula; 2) North Korea is in desperate economic condition and needs both economic reform and humanitarian aid; 3) There will be no preemptive military attack, and 4) the negotiations must be multilateral.

The overriding problem is rooted in North Korea's pursuit of WMD and its powerful conventional military forces. Its track record of violence, assassination, frontal attack and its closed ideology of *juche* (self-reliance) combine to create an isolated and aggressive state immune from international standards and conduct. Its economy has been shattered by lunatic social engineering and brutal Stalinist control, which has resulted in massive starvation, a failing industrial plant and the sale of narcotics and missiles for revenue. The state cannot feed, clothe or warm its people without outside help. So much for "self-reliance." It has put its limited money and resources into its military and thus has the capability to damage or even destroy its neighbors. It almost succeeded in doing this to South Korea in 1950 and could do it again.

This is clearly a regional problem, not solely an American one. The United States did try to ameliorate the nuclear-weapons problem in the 1990s with massive imputes of grain, oil and money into North Korea in the hope that Pyongyang would dismantle its nuclear-weapons machine. North Korea took U.S. aid, Chinese aid, and South Korean money and food while it kept physical control of its spent fuel rods, the raw material of nuclear weapons, and started a secret Highly Enriched Uranium nuclear weapons program. It allowed only controlled International Atomic Energy Agency inspection of its exposed nuclear reactors at Yongbyon and allowed an international consortium led by the United States to start building two giant nuclear power plants worth over four billion U.S. dollars.

The North Koreans in private conversations with the Japanese and others could hardly believe how they had lucked out.

North Korea's greatest concern now is that its neighbors and the U.S. will cooperate in getting it to give up its nuclear weapons and will condition their aid on compliance. The North Korean tactic in response is to finger the U.S. as the problem, propagandize about a U.S. military threat to its existence, characterize its military as defensive but use its military threat to extort money, food and aid of all sorts. The priority is to survive with the current regime in power by getting as much aid as it can without changing its system or giving up its ultimate tool, nuclear blackmail. To maximize its chances of success it must split the coalition, deal with each party separately, play one off the other, alternately threaten and make conciliatory comments to each side then deny what it has said. The North is not seeking agreements so much as concessions. This has been true since 1951, from the beginning of U.S. negotiations with them.

North Korea is delaying joining the six-party talks until after the U.S. elections in the hope that a new U.S., administration will revert to the generous policies of the 1990s. At the same time it is upping the ante by demanding that the U.S. drop its "hostile" policy.

North Korea means several different things by that. One is for the U.S. to give unconditional and substantial aid and help Pyongyang tap international financial institutions for funds. The U.S., of course, must also lift all sanctions and take North Korea off the state-sponsored terrorist list, extend diplomatic recognition and end the U.S. military presence in South Korea. North Korea has also refused U.S. demands that it dismantle its known nuclear facilities with adequate verification. This was not the pattern established in the 1990s by the Clinton Administration, which pleased the North Koreans.

Aid can come to North Korea, but not until it clearly demonstrates it is closing down its nuclear-weapons program.

North Korea's demands and performance at the talks have infuriated its neighbors. It has backed off from commitments at the last minute, changed its story on the uranium program, and slandered the U.S. in a way that makes "Axis of Evil" sound like Sunday school talk. All of this mixed with the negotiators' proclivity for the hard stuff, particularly brandy, which has impeded late-night negotiating sessions. And the North Koreans have not only demanded more money from their neighbors for attending the talks but also that they publicly criticize the U.S. for its "inflexibility."

The U.S. held direct bilateral talks with North Korea under the umbrella of the six-party talks and is prepared to continue them. U.S. allies and friends, principally China and South Korea, are continuing their aid and development projects hopefully to draw North Korea gradually toward more rational economic policies.

The U.S. should have no problem with this but the U.S. does encourage its partners to link greater aid to progress on reducing the nuclear threat.

One problem is that almost all participants in the talks have their own agenda with North Korea. Japan has the issue of abductees that North Korea has taken over the years; South Korea has an interest in developing the cross-border Kaesong industrial zone, and China has the North Korea refugee problem. These can all be managed bilaterally. WMD however, should be handled by all parties jointly since it is a common issue. China and South Korea, however, fear a North Korea implosion if it is denied aid, which could end up with millions of refugees, warlords with nukes, and major destabilization on Northeast Asia. North Korea can be said to put a gun to its own head and is threatening to pull the trigger if it is not bought off.

Human rights concerns should be brought up at the talks bilaterally by the United States with the expectation that others will eventually raise them too. North Korea's brutal record with its own citizens is well documented by authenticated refugee reports, overhead photography and other reliable means. No civilized country can ignore the huge gulags in Northeast North Korea which contrast with the lavish life-styles of the North Korea elites. The United States, the world and especially Koreans everywhere need to speak out on the suffering of South Korea's blood brothers.

The situation is bleak and dangerous but there is no way North Korea can prevail. It is a small failed state, surrounded by modern and successful countries, Japan, China and South Korea.

The first steps have been taken toward a regional approach. This could in turn lead to a North Asia regional security arrangement with North Korea eventually becoming a full and more prosperous partner. This would be designed to guarantee peace and stability in the area. It will not be easy, some say it would be like herding cats, but we are already on this path -- this is not the time to reverse this trend, whoever is in the White House.

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